



“Coetzee” – Surname of the week

Meaning: This is a disputed point and could be derived from either “Koetsier” – “couch driver”, or “Coet” - “one who dwelt at a cottage”.

The Coetzee family fame in South Africa has a bit of a mystery to it. The original progenitor of this surname in South Africa, was a Dirk Coetzee, of Kampen (Nederland), Born 1655, son of Gerhard Coetze and Margaretha Claasdochter. He came to South Africa in 8 may 1679. He lived in Cape Town (Papendorp) for four years and received in 1682 from Simon van der Stel the well-known farm “Coetzenberg” at Stellenbosch. He later also owned “Assegai Bosch” at Jonkershoek. In 1687 he was elected as mayor and in 1706 he was captain of the Stellenbosch infantry. He died in 1725 in Cape Town. His marriage was in Nederland to a Sara van der Schulp of Amsterdam and they had 10 children.

The mystery surrounding the surname as detailed by Jan-Wouter Zwart:

The origin of the common South-African family name Coetzee, the tenth most common surname in South-Africa, is somewhat mysterious. South-African family names are often transparently derived from English, Dutch or French (Huguenot) family names, but Coetzee is not. The surname itself is not indigenous to any part of Europe. The English Wikipedia states, without reference, that Coetzee derives from Hungarian Kocsi (“from Kocs”). In the absence of a credible narrative, we may discard this as folk etymology. More interestingly, the Dutch Wikipedia connects the name Coetzee to a Dirk Couché (1655-1725) who immigrated to the Cape Colony from Kampen (in what is now the Netherlands) in 1679. This information is based on South-African genealogical research, summarized in the Coetzee article on the South Africa’s Stamouers website. As detailed there, ‘Couché was the son of a Gerard Couche and Margarita Claasdogter, and had ten children with his wife, Sara van der Schulp (1654-1728). They settled in Coetsenburg in 1682. If Dirk Couche was the first Coetzee in South-Africa, one can imagine that the name spread relatively rapidly via his prodigious offspring. The French name Couché suggests that Dirk was from a Huguenot family in Kampen, and this is the conclusion drawn in the English Wikipedia article on Dirk Coetsee. However, the name Couché/Coetzee/Coetsee is not listed as a surviving Huguenot name by the Huguenot Society of South Africa. More seriously, the name is also unknown in current records of Dutch family names. It is therefore believed there is room for serious doubt that the person arriving at the Cape on May 8, 1679 was actually named Couché. The fact that the immigrant’s family came to be known as Coetzee, and that he gave the name Coetsenburg to the Stellenbosch estate granted to him by Simon van der Stel in 1682, only three years after his arrival, suggests that he himself was unhappy with the rendition of his family name as Couché. So what could Dirk’s name have been? I suggest that we take the pronunciation of the name Coetzee as our starting point. We may safely assume that the English pronunciation is guided by the orthography, so that the first syllable of the name can be fixed as [kut]. The second syllable is stressed, starts with [s] and has a long, diphthongized coda. Diphthongization of long vowels is common enough in current Afrikaans. We know that Dirk came from the Kampen area, where (as in East Netherlandish more generally) long vowels are monophthongized. This would bring us close to the current pronunciation of the final vowel in the Afrikaans surname Coetzee. We can finally reconstruct Dirk’s family name as Koetsier (Standard Dutch [kutˈsiːr]. Koetsier is a common enough name in the Netherlands (with **1164** registrations in the year 1947 and **1953** sixty years later), showing a concentration in the western parts of Gelderland and Overijssel bordering on the IJsselmeer, which includes the Zwolle/Kampen region. Zwart thus hypothesize, then, that the name of the founding father of the Afrikaans Coetzee family line was Dirk Koetsier. It must be accepted, on this scenario, that Dirk Koetsier was erroneously registered as Couché when he first set foot on South-African soil. From this perspective, the name Coetzee must have come into use later as an attempt to correct the official spelling, guided by the name bearer’s own pronunciation of his name.

Some well-known people carried the “Coetzee” name:

Basil Coetzee (1944–1998), South African musician
Clem Coetzee (c. 1939 – 2006), Zimbabwean conservationist
Danie Coetzee (born 1977), South African rugby union footballer
Dirk Coetzee (1945–2013), co-founder and commander of the covert South African Police unit in the 1990s
Felix Coetzee (born 1959), South African jockey in thoroughbred horse racing
George Coetzee (born 1986), South African golfer
Gerrie Coetzee (born 1955), South African boxer
Hannes Coetzee (born 1944), South African guitarist
Hendrik Coetzee (c. 1975 – 2010), South African adventurer
Jandre Coetzee (born 1984), South African first class cricketer
Jeff Coetzee (born 1977), South African tennis player
J. M. Coetzee (born 1940), South African-Australian author awarded the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature
Justin Coetzee (born 1984), South African-Australian cricketer
Lee Coetzee (born 1984), South African cricketer
Pietie Coetzee (born 1978), South African field hockey player
Price Coetzee (born 1946), South African actor
Rivaldo Coetzee (born 1996), South African footballer
Ryan Coetzee (born 1973), South African politician and political strategist, businessman
Tansey Coetzee (born 1984), Miss South Africa 2008
Roan Coetzee (born 1974), rugby union footballer
Allister Coetzee (born 1963), South African rugby coach

